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AARP plans statewide campaign to discuss issues

Thursday, Aug 24, 2006

By Rob Moritz
Arkansas News Bureau

LITTLE ROCK - AARP Arkansas plans to push an agenda for improved long-term care funding, better security for nursing home residents and payday lending reform in a statewide campaign this fall, the organization announced Wednesday.

AARP Arkansas President Billy Ann Myers and several volunteers showed off the organization's new AARP Voter Express van at a news conference outside the state Capitol. Myers said the group would use the vehicle to take its campaign on the road between now and the Nov. 7 general.

The van "really is a wonderful tool for us to have when we travel to fairs and things like that," she.

At the news conference, Myers released the results of a member poll that identified the top three issues of interest as:

- Reforming the long-term care system to better fund home- and community-based services.

- Protecting those who live in nursing homes, and promoting quality care.

- Keeping payday lending interest rates low.

Those issues also will top AARP's legislative agenda for the 2007 General Assembly, Myers said.

"These are the issues that really need to be addressed in the next session," she said.

Myers said long-term care funding must be "rebalanced" to pay for the home- and community-based services that people need. Arkansas currently spends more than 70 percent of its Medicaid long-term care budget on nursing homes, she said.

"Not 70 percent of the people are in institutions, so we need to rebalance that," she said.

On improving quality care in nursing homes, Myers said AARP will urge the Legislature to oppose any tort reform legislation. She said the group supported the Civil Justice Reform Act of 2003, which capped financial awards in civil suits at \$1 million for

punitive damages and made changes to rules that allowed one defendant to be held liable for the whole damage award if the other defendants cannot afford to pay.

"Adding to the protections nursing homes already have ... would just let some nursing homes escape accountability for abuse and neglect," Myers said.

The organization also plans to push for an amendment to the 1999 Check Cashiers Act.

The act allows some out-of-state banks affiliated with check cashers not licensed in Arkansas to hand out small loans above the state-mandated interest rate limit of 17 percent annually. Some payday lenders charge rates as high as 520 percent.

Myers said AARP wants the Legislature to change to law to restrict payday lenders to charging no more than 17 percent.

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